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Senate OKs budget bill with caps set by Bush

ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Wednesday passed a \$464 billion spending bill that closes out last year's unfinished budget business while providing clues about how the new Democratic Congress and President Bush will do business.

The bill, passed 81-15, sticks to Bush's overall budget caps but finds numerous ways around them to add to programs favored by lawmakers, such as education, health care, food inspection and mine safety.

Ohio Republican Sen. George Voinovich blasted the bill as gimmick-filled, and said it shortchanges military projects such as the planned expansion of the Pentagon's Defense Finance and Accounting Service offices in Cleveland. Saying the long-delayed measure was symptomatic of a "lazy budgeting process," Voinovich voted no.

But Ohio Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown noted that this budget process was left over by Republican leaders who failed to finish their work in the last Congress. Democrats acknowledge they took out \$3 billion for the military projects including DFAS expansion in Cleveland, but say they will provide for the projects in an upcoming defense spending bill.

"Five months after Republicans should have finished this process, I'm glad we finally got this funding bill passed. Now we can focus on the critical work that needs to be done in Congress on behalf of the nation's middle class," Brown said.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, called the action Wednesday "another step towards cleaning up the fiscal mess left by the 109th Congress," Reid said.

The mammoth bill pulls together nine unfinished spending bills funding foreign aid and every domestic agency budget except the Homeland Security Department.

The bill provides small but welcome funding increases to agencies that have been limping along at or below last year's funding levels in the four months since the budget year started Oct. 1. Without the measure, food inspectors, FBI agents and air traffic controllers faced furloughs, while more than 200,000 low-income people could have lost housing subsidies.

The measure now heads to Bush, who has signaled he will sign it despite unease over the temporary cuts to the base closing program. The money would help pay for the redeployment of 12,000 troops stationed in Germany and South Korea to domestic bases and to prepare closed bases for economic development projects and other uses.

Next up is Bush's \$100 billion Iraq and Afghanistan war funding request, which is widely expected to draw Democratic extras such as \$4 billion or so in farm disaster aid when the appropriations committees debate it next month. The White House wants to keep the Iraq funding bill as free as possible from such add-ons, but it is likely to have to accept some Democratic priorities as the price of getting the bill to his desk.

Then will come the fiscal 2008 appropriations cycle, during which Democrats are certain to transfer some of the proposed \$50 billion-plus increase for the Pentagon budget — not including war costs — to domestic programs, which are almost frozen under Bush's budget.

Plain Dealer reporter Steve Koff contributed to this story.